

# Time for a Dharma Prabodh in Sri Lanka

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Our title means

It is Now Time for The Buddhists of Sri Lanka to Comprehend Their Dhamma.

The year now stands at 2003 and this is the month of December. *Unduvap* marks the last full-moon day of the year. The old order has to change, yielding place to new. In other words, what we are seriously suggesting is that over a period of twenty three centuries, or more so in the recent decades, practice of Buddhism in Sri Lanka has violently got veered off its course. Internationalism or inter-regionalism in the practice of Buddhism [with devastating threats from many neighboring Buddhist countries in the world] has invaded Sri Lanka. We believe, and we obviously see in these, very disastrous results.

Loss of a sense of historical stratification through centuries of expansion across time and place and the attractiveness of more updated rituals of worship and prayer, most of them tinted with music and song, have attracted both the elite and the commoners to these soul-stirring congregations in Sri Lanka today, which are unquestionably believed to be divinely inspired. Besides their momentary gratification of sensory demands, they are also believed to assure the devotees of long-term monetary rewards in gold and silver and abundant overflow of personal glory in name and fame. Even eminent religious men of diverse creeds, no matter for whatever reason, are not only seen falling victims to these alluring displays, but are seen even patronizing them.

Behold humanity at large in the world today and their attraction to religiousness in their daily life. What do religions promise them and what do humans expect out of them? Thousands of years ago, even before the time of

the Buddha, Vedic Aryans of India prayed to their gods like Indra and Varuna for **wealth, food** and even gifts of **heroic sons**. *Rayim viravatim isam* was the text of their regular prayer. They knew what they wanted in the very life they were living here. Even strong and heroic sons to consolidate their communal solidarity here on earth, i.e. the need to fight for their survival.

But with increasing intellectual maturity of mankind, particularly in India, it is believed that his world view changed and in his aspirations and expectations via religion, man learnt to seek for something more fundamental than mere bread and butter in daily life. He did not have to seek it from outside, through a mechanistic daily prayer and supplication through eulogies. Or by whatever other name one calls these religious activities of neo-adoption.

In the days of old, man's relationship to the cosmic life process, even though it kept violently swinging between the creationist and evolutionary extremes, brought about a sense of sanity and sobriety than a rabid theory of mere materialism where life totally ended in one's death. This in itself was believed to be the beginning of a new dimension of life. Buddhists do not subscribe to it as such, that death in itself opens a new vista on the long journey of life. However, life's extension beyond a mere three score years and ten seemed to make more sense than otherwise.

It is in such a setting that the Indians visualized the reality of the cosmic vastness which is very much believed in the world of science today. They knew of the evolution and the devolution of the universe [*samvatta* and *vivatta kappas*]. They also knew of the complexity of the galaxies of diverse magnitude [*lokadhatu*]. In Indian religious thinking, this brought about the healthy and wholesome wedlock of time and space. They believed that humans traversed through in *Samsara*, moving on from death to death [*mrtyoh sa mrtyum apnoti*], i.e **into another life at different levels where death is inevitable**. The terminus of this death-dealing cyclical continuance, the Indians called liberation or *moksa*. Buddhists specifically call this Nirvana. Both the Indians and the Buddhists

believed that this was brought about **through a culture of some sort**, psychological, religio-emotional and intellectual, where the human has to actively engage himself in.

Let us now make a very brief introduction to what we would consider to be the comprehension of what is taught in Buddhism as its **dharma**. In what we legitimately consider to be the core Buddhism, i.e. the basic teachings of early Buddhism, there is no gainsaying that the early teachings of the Sutta Pitaka rank foremost. This is what stands as the Dhamma, i.e. *dhamma par excellence*, in the earliest phase of the religion, in marked contrast to the Vinaya which follows the Dhamma in natural succession [for the guidance and regulation of the life of those who have totally renounced the life in the household.].

The earliest Sutta references spell out the Bodhisatta's [i.e. of Siddhartha of the Gotama clan] first prompting as he steps out of his father's kingly domain, in search of an answer to the common human problems which **life invariably brings in its wake**. They are basically physical, unmistakably carrying all natural and exceptional failings of the human body. Nevertheless, all these items like growth and consequent decay, diseases contracted from time to time, naturally or through sheer neglect, accidental damage and timely or untimely death are but inheritance of being human.

The fact that all these realistic happenings to the human **on account of his very basic nature**, are to a greater or lesser degree unavoidable on account of being human. But a wise man would keep these **grieves of maladjustment**, how humans react to being human at a minimum, through religiously acquired wiser judgement. These are very summarily packed in **the Buddhist charter of saner thinking** within the triad of *tilakkhana* [or three signata of life] of the liability to change of everything in the universe, consequently ill-generated grief over this inevitable change, and the discovery to one's joy or dismay of the absence of a lasting and enduring divine self within this self-operative human mechanism called life.

Viewing from both angles of the genesis of this unsatisfactoriness in human life [*dukkham*] and its possible complete termination in Nirvana [*dukkhassa ca nirodham*], the Buddha sums up his whole teaching to be within this. He claims that what he teaches at all times is about the genesis of *dukkha* of man and its cessation [*dukkhassa ca nirodham.*]. No man wants to or is brave enough to face *dukkha*. So he either passes on the responsibility for it on to another or prays to another for its merciful reduction.

Besides these purely physical items of *dukkha* generated through the physical body of humans as its basis, there is also an equally weighty quantum of *dukkha* resulting to man through his emotional maladjustment to situations of daily occurrence in the world, namely those of personal relationships of likes and dislikes. They certainly are much more controllable and correctable, only if humans had an awareness as to their origin. Our likes and dislikes sit rigidly on judgement over our sensory gratification.

Over all these personal situations in life through which we go, humans have learnt, through their ill-tutored religious instructions over generations in this country, to pass over the responsibility to various fanciful areas of divine intervention and viciousness of evil spirits, to astrological influences, to witchcraft and black magic etc. It is in situations like these that the very sound philosophical explanations of Buddhism are arrogantly swept off the scene and the social elite and high ranking intellectuals of our society, openly as well as secretly, embrace the beliefs and the practices of those even below the level of rustics.

We are convinced that today this is the lamentable situation in Sri Lanka with regard to the comprehension of the true doctrine of the Buddha as propounded by him in his day. For those who want to see it, it is undeniably preserved intact, if only one seriously wishes to discover it. Centuries and centuries of deflection of the dhamma, in different parts of the world, has altered it beyond recognition. The attractiveness of the new product, particularly when it carries the label in Sri Lanka of being imported, is amazingly challenging, particularly to those who have

lost their bearings with ease or surrendered their national identities. We have the facts and figures, as well as the identities of the staggering intellectuals of this country who regularly propagate with pride these new brand names in high class market places.

As the Buddha himself clearly announces in the suttas, it is the reality of *dukkha* or unsatisfactoriness of life in the world that he first proclaims and thereafter the way out of it, i.e. *dukkha* and its *nirodha*. But centuries of deflected Buddhist thinking which followed, flowing in from many alien sources, have made the preachers of the dhamma of the later times paint rosy kingdoms of heavenly worlds. Traditional Sutta texts condemn such aspirations in no uncertain terms. This newly emerging popular doctrine lure people to get ceaselessly trapped in the samsaric maze, with no solution within sight.